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**“MOVING ON” OR “STUCK IN THE PAST”:  
ABANDONING OR EMBRACING HISTORY IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE  
MANAGEMENT**

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**“MOVING ON” OR “STUCK IN THE PAST”:  
ABANDONING OR EMBRACING HISTORY  
IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

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The aim of this paper is to further our understandings of the constituent role of history in organizational change processes. The paper interconnects past, present and future by operationalizing the triple historicization of Bourdieu (1977; Wacquant, 2016) and by linking it to the narratives and counter narratives (Gabriel, 2017) of the participants, in order to view organizational change in a temporal perspective and acquire a historical consciousness (Suddaby, 2016), i.e. attentiveness to history and time as constituent elements in organizational change. The theoretical contributions of the paper are underpinned by a 5-month multi-sited ethnographic field study (conducted by the first author) of organizational change processes in a Danish telecommunications service provider.

Drawing on interviews and participant observation data, the project reports on initial findings from a rare empirical case of organizational change in shape of implementation of performance management in a former state-owned, unionized institution. In 1992, the company was sold in an IPO

by the Danish state, and around the same time the market was liberated. Hence, the company went from being a monopolized public institution to a private entity competing in a free market. The implementation of performance management instantly commenced as demands for higher productivity and profits increased. Currently, the department under study is facing outsourcing if failing to comply with specific performance targets.

Initial findings expose a dichotomy in perceptions of the past between two distinct logics, identified in two conflicting narratives; the one of the *public regime* and the one of the *private regime*. Management views history as an obstacle for change, and the past as incompatible with the desired, envisioned future of the company. Seeing history as having no place in the future, management seeks to abandon, the past. On the other hand, to the employees, the past is reminiscent of ‘good old days’; implying a nostalgic narrative with a sentimental quality and ego-supporting purpose (Gabriel, 2017), something one would want to hold on to, or even return to, implying a discontinuity separating the past from the present, abandoning the future. This dichotomy of perceptions and constructions, as well as implicit assumptions about the past and history, as more or less compatible with the present or the future, creates severe tension between management and employees and thus becomes constituent of the creation of the future.

The genesis of this paper is the notion that all behavior is historical, as it takes place over time and in particular contexts (Zald, 1996). Consequently, in order to study a change process one must understand how it unfolds over time, and how it is affected by time and history (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005); this makes accounting for organizational history essential to any change process (Gioia, Corley, & Fabbri, 2002).

According to Hernes et al. (2013), organization and management studies have displayed an asymmetry in its treatment of past and future in which the former represents inertia, extinction and closure and the latter represents change, hope and possibility. Yet, despite an emerging attention

among organization scholars to address time, temporality and history (Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence, & Tushman, 2001; Bucheli & Wadhwani, 2014; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013; Schultz & Hernes, 2013) and increased efforts to adopt a “historical consciousness” (Suddaby, 2016), time (Huy, 2001), temporality (Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Wiebe, 2010) and history (Burrell, 1997; Jacques, 1995; Kieser, 1994; Zald, 1996) still remain under-studied and under-theorized in organization studies.

In this paper, we propose the praxeology of Bourdieu as a viable pathway to bring a historical perspective (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2017), which responds to calls for “*greater reflexivity regarding the epistemological problem of representing the past*” (Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014). Thus, the paper will demonstrate how a Bourdieusian framework provides a temporal orientation and awareness, which enables us to explore the constituent nature of history in organizational change processes, in a conceptual and theoretical manner that moves beyond the traditional notions of time and history (Dawson, 2014).

Bourdieu’s praxeology is based on the triple historicization of the agent (*habitus*), the world (social space and fields) and of the categories and methods of the social analyst (*reflexivity*) (Wacquant, 2016). *Habitus* can be defined as a (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82): “*system of dispositions - a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices*”. As such, *habitus* is shaped by agents’ socio-historical trajectory through field(s), i.e. structured spaces of positions (Gomez, 2010) and functions as the historically accumulated capital of agents (Wacquant, 2016). In other words, *habitus* is a system of layers of enduring and transposable dispositions integrating all past experiences. It is, (Wacquant, 2016, pp. 66-67): “... *a prism through which later experiences are filtered and subsequent strata of dispositions overlaid*”. In this sense, the dispositions acquired in the past are at every moment part of present actions and perceptions. Thus, *habitus* always produces history on the basis of history (Wacquant, 2016). This perspective can

fruitfully be combined with a narrative approach, since “*narratives can be seen as stories of our experience in time, grounded in events linked together in a temporal way*” (Cunliffe, Luhman, & Boje, 2004). By drawing on the dynamic and co-creative nature of narrative and counter narratives (Gabriel, 2017), we can see how nostalgic stories of an idealized past, critically countering the makings of the present, become a part of the organization’s narrative ecology, whereby they become incorporated into the stories of the present as well as resources for the future. We combine this with a model proposed by Thorkildsen and Ødegård (2012, p. 4):

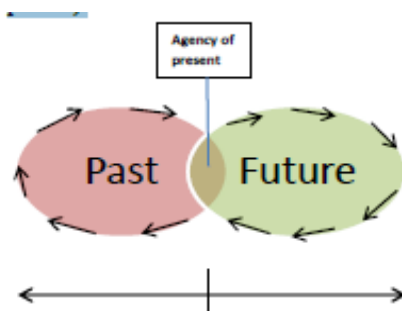


Figure 2: Temporal Identity dynamics and the agency of present

Fig. 1

developed in order to illustrate how: “*identity claims in various ways relate to the continuum of the temporal dimension by:*

- (1) *Abandoning the past, projecting a completely different future,*
- (2) *Abandoning the future, by orienting towards the past, and*
- (3) *„Back to the future”, by evoking the past and drawing on the cultural heritage as a vital resource in the creation of the future (agency of present).”*

Furthermore, as the change process under study concerns implementation of performance management in a unionized entity, sub-contributions of the paper will be to develop practice-inspired insights and understandings of performance management, which are called for in a field dominated by functionalist and positivist approaches (McKenna, Richardson, & Manroop, 2011), in a unionized

context which is a rarely considered empirical setting in performance management studies (Brown & Warren, 2011).

In sum, the paper addresses the following research question: *How can the triple historicization of Bourdieu, linked to narratives and counter narratives of participants, advance our understanding of history and time as constituent of organizational change?*

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